

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3)

According to the ancient fables, for the suitor to gain the hand of the princess in marriage

- He must carry water in a sieve, or sort a huge pile of grains and lentils in a single night
- Or make a rope of ashes, or according to the Ballad, *Scarborough Fair*, to be the woman's true love
- He must find an acre of land between the sea and the beach, plough it with a lamb's horn,
- Sow it all over with one peppercorn, reap it with a sickle of leather and tie it with a rope of heather
- In other words, humanly speaking it is impossible – something extraordinary has to happen

The Sermon on the Mount, the greatest body of the teaching of Jesus that we have (Matthew 5-7)

- Has been appreciated by all kinds of people, some, like Mahatma Gandhi
- would not call themselves Christians but accept that it is a wonderful summary of moral teaching
- sharing with Christians, like Martin Luther King, a vision for political change by non-violent means
- but on closer examination, however inspiring the Sermon on the Mount might be
- we cannot doubt that by ordinary human standards – its teaching is impossible to achieve
- if we looked for a text on which Jesus was teaching in this Sermon on the Mount, where six times he says
- 'you have heard that it was said but I say to you,' (or similar) it would be hard to better his own words
- 'A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another
- By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another' (John 13:34-35)
- But if keeping the letter of the law in a limited understanding of the commandments was hard
- Keeping the spirit of the law as Jesus expounds it is harder still and at the climax of this passage he says
- 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:38) – how can we be like God?

Of the four Gospels, we might call Matthew, ‘The Teaching Gospel’ – Matthew has preserved five discourses

- alternating with narratives about Jesus’ activities – the first discourse being ‘The Sermon on the Mount’
- Luke arranges his Gospel in a different way, but there is a very similar passage in Luke’s Gospel
- And while some readers have made a great deal of the differences between the two accounts
- These are mostly resolved by acknowledging that the (30-minute) sermon as recorded in Matthew 5-7
- Is almost certainly a summary of a day or more’s teaching

The great crowd that gathered showed Jesus to be at the height of his popularity

- While the traditional name suggests a sermon on a hill, more precisely Matthew says in the ‘hill country’
- allowing harmony with the level place (Lk. 6:17) near the mountainside where Jesus prayed (Lk. 7:12)
- Matthew mentions three groups of people around Jesus: disciples, religious leaders and crowds
- While Jesus’ objective was to make disciples from out of the crowd
- here ‘disciples’ means any who have made some kind of commitment to Jesus and not just the Twelve
- sitting was the usual posture of a teacher in the synagogue or school and in this way Jesus began to teach

After the opening narratives in the Gospel about his genealogy and nativity, his baptism and temptation

- Jesus announced his kingdom mission (4:17), called his first followers (4:18-22)
- And conducted an extraordinary teaching, preaching and healing tour of Galilee (4:22-25)
- In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus develops in detail the kind of life available to those who respond
- To the message of the Kingdom of heaven – to be part of this Kingdom is the ultimate reward
- Matthew does not neglect the saving work of Jesus on the cross – that is still the key to God’s grace

In the early part of the last century, many Protestants preached what is called ‘the social gospel’

- Expressed simply, this taught that by social reform, public health measures and education
- Poor people could develop talents and skills and the quality of their moral lives would begin to improve
- While pressing for social reform, public health and education is clearly not wrong
- It represents only a partial understanding of the implications of the Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount was addressed to disciples, those who had responded to the message of the Kingdom

- Part of that response was repentance (3:2, 4:17) which deals with the wrong in our lives
- But should we understand the Sermon on the Mount only as ‘moral teaching’, ‘an impossible ideal’
- Or what you might call ‘a deluxe edition of Christianity’ for a special group of committed believers
- In this view the crowds are the ordinary believers, and the disciples the elite believers
- But when we read the Bible carefully, the disciples are believers and the crowds are unbelievers
- So that we can only conclude that what Jesus teaches here is how disciples are supposed to live now
- And in doing this he makes an invitation for others to enter the Kingdom of heaven
- The Sermon on the Mount is about both the forgiveness of sins and the transformation of lives
- In this way, the teaching of Matthew is not at odds with the teaching of John, as some have suggested
- As if one were teaching a ‘social gospel’ and the other were teaching an ‘evangelical gospel’
- Matthew’s Gospel shows the standard required by Jesus Christ – a standard requiring a new life
- A new life that begins with the new birth by the Spirit of God (as shown by John’s Gospel)
- For people who do not accept the idea of the new birth – the Sermon becomes unattainable ideals
- But for those who realise we ‘must be born again’ – the Sermon becomes an expression of the new life

The Sermon on the Mount opens with ‘the Beatitudes’ a name that comes from the Latin *beatus* (blessed)

- These are not the only Beatitudes in the Bible, they are found in the Psalms (1:1; 31:1-2; 144:15)
- In Proverbs (3:13), ‘Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding’
- And in Daniel (12:12) but the Old Testament never has more than two Beatitudes together (Ps. 84:4-5)
- Luke (6:20-26) has a list of four Beatitudes (all in the second person), slightly different from Matthew’s
- And these are followed by a list of four woes (a dimension which does not appear here in Matthew)
- Distinguished Methodist New Testament Professor, Howard Marshall, an eminent authority on Luke
- Suggests that Luke describes what the disciples actually are and Matthew what they ought to be

At his inaugural sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus was handed the scroll of Isaiah

- And read a passage from Isaiah 61:1-3: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me
- To proclaim good news to the poor’ – it seems that the Sermon on the Mount opens
- With deliberate echoes of that passage and the sermon in the synagogue
- While the word ‘blessed’ is not perhaps an ordinary everyday word, ‘happy’ just will not do
- For not only has ‘happy’ been devalued and cheapened in modern usage – the focus tends to be inside
- Whereas the focus of blessed is the judgment of God and of others – with a promise of what is to come
- One Bible commentator describes them as a sober yet dazzling vision of the operation of the Kingdom
- This is not a formal literary introduction but the essence of the sermon’s message
- God’s blessing rests on unlikely people – the poor in spirit, mourners, the meek, the persecuted
- They turn the usual order of things upside down, or more accurately, they turn it the right way up
- The first of these sayings is ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven’

I EXCLUDES PRIDE

One of the first things to notice about the Beatitudes in general and the first in particular

- Is that there is no way in which these Beatitudes represent a call to earn salvation by human merit
- The Beatitudes are not intended to describe eight different people, but eight characteristics of one
- No one could earn salvation by living out these qualities – for without grace it would be impossible
- The Sermon on the Mount tells us what Christians ought to be like – but we cannot do it
- Unless we realise that these qualities are not self-produced but God-given
- It is a statement of an inward transformation, the operation of the grace of God in the heart
- And that excludes pride – the world at large thinks ‘blessed are the materially rich’
- But the values of the Kingdom are different from that ‘blessed are the poor in spirit’

Some years ago I was visiting what was outwardly a very successful church – the minister was a friend

- ‘Things are going well here,’ I observed
- ‘It looks that way,’ he replied, ‘but because of that we have a lot of pride’
- It put me in mind of the letter to the seventh church at Laodicea (in Revelation 3:14-22)
- ‘you say, “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.”
- But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked’ (Revelation 3:18)
- Rather a contrast to the second church at Smyrna (Revelation 2:8-11)
- ‘I know your afflictions and your poverty – yet you are rich!’
- Isaiah (Isa. 6:5), Peter (Lk. 5:8) and Paul (1 Tim. 1:15) realised they were sinners and poor in spirit

II IGNORES PERSONALITY

As part of a project I did with the University of Wales, we used a short personality questionnaire

- Developed by Hans Jürgen Eysenck and his wife, Sybil, this helped identify personality traits
- And later gave rise to a paper, '*Methodist ministers: Masculine Women, Feminine Men*'
- Reporting that the female ministers recorded lower neuroticism scores than the wider female population
- And the male ministers recorded lower psychoticism scores than the wider male population
- E.g. A woman minister is less likely to say that her feelings are easily hurt than the typical woman
- A male minister is more likely to say that he takes notice of what others think the typical man
- Even a simple description of personality traits identifies introversion/extraversion, stability/instability
- But while we might more readily associate some personality traits with Christianity and the church
- The Beatitudes ignore personality – even people we expect to be self-confident, competent, self-reliant
- Must stand before God as men and women who are poor in spirit

Poor in spirit does not mean that we need to be retiring, weak, lacking in courage or affecting humility

- like Uriah Heep in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* making frequent references to 'humbleness'
- there is something amazing when we meet someone who we might expect to be proud
- even in the modern church we are not immune to the cult of personality and celebrity
- and yet we can meet truly great people (and I have met them) who exemplify Charles Wesley's words
- What have I then wherein to trust/I nothing have, I nothing am
- Excluded is my every boast/My glory swallowed up in shame (from *Wherewith O God shall I draw near*)

III PATH TO PERFECTION

When, as believers, we realise our own helplessness and worthlessness, we appreciate the wonder of the gospel

- That Jesus the pure and holy one, the perfect Lamb of God, has died on the cross for us
- He did not have to do it but he chose to do it, we did not deserve it but he died for the undeserving
- It is through his matchless love and by his grace that we, in faith, can *be becoming* new people
- For it is God's plan that through Christ we should not only be 'in him' but 'like him'
- That does not mean that we are to be clones but it does mean that we are to show his nature

This is where the theology of Wesleyan heritage differs from the wider Christian church

- When this happens, it might be advisable not to push too hard
- contending that we are right and everyone else is wrong, (the same can be said of baptism and bishops)
- Jesus' disciples participate in real forgiveness of sins through the redemptive work of Christ on the cross
- they experience the real beginnings of kingdom life that comes by the regenerative work of the Spirit
- they experience transformation by the Spirit into the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18)
- to be poor in spirit excludes pride, it ignores personality and by faith it sets us on the path to perfection
- the summons is to 'be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect' (Matthew 5:48)
- For Wesley and the early Methodists Christlikeness was not an unattainable goal
- To them it was not a theoretical discussion, whether absolute perfection was possible in this life
- But practical living, perfect love – that is to have victory over all known sin
- And to be completely at peace with God